



Directorate of
Intelligence

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Latin America Review [REDACTED]

18 May 1990

Approved for Release
NOV 1993

[REDACTED]

El Salvador: Cleaning Up the Military

Public and internal criticism of the military's image and effectiveness has intensified since the insurgent offensive last November, increasing pressure on the High Command to confront human rights abuses, corruption, and incompetence in the officer corps. Thus far, reform efforts have focused principally on removing some members of the military academy class—or *tanda*—of 1966, which holds many senior leadership positions. Although this class—known as the *Tandones* because of its large size—assumed its positions only last year, critics, including the government, the US Embassy, and junior officers, already are calling for the dismissal of many class members from their command posts. In April, the High Command transferred two long-criticized *Tandones* members, but failed to make other anticipated changes, including the long-awaited promotion of Chief of Staff Ponce—a *Tandones* member generally regarded as a reformer—to Minister of Defense.

The Defense Attache Device

Over the years, the military has taken care of undesirable elements in the officer corps by "exiling" them to well-paid defense attache jobs, where they can preserve their pensions and pursue their own businesses. The "exiles" typically are officers accused of human rights abuses or corruption who are considered politically unsuitable by civil authorities or the Army High Command. [redacted] indicates that the class of 1966 supported the ousting of the following senior officers because they stood in the way of ambitious *Tandones* members who wanted to move up:

- Col. Denis Moran, now the defense attache in Guatemala, has also filled attache positions in Washington and Colombia. In 1979 he [redacted] directed a rightist terrorist group called the White Warriors Union. He headed the National Guard intelligence section in the early 1980s, when it was linked to death squad activities, and was implicated in

the murders of three land reform experts in a San Salvador hotel in 1981.

- Gen. Adolfo Blandon serves as defense attache in Washington following his removal as Chief of Staff last year. [redacted]
- Col. Oscar Rodolfo Campos Anaya is the defense attache in Brazil and has also served in Washington. While commanding the 1st Brigade, [redacted] blocked an investigation into alleged human rights abuses by his company. [redacted]

The *Tandones*' Record

More recently, the *Tandones* has resisted cleaning up the military. [redacted] indicates that the class of 1966 does not want to see its preeminence curtailed by reforms that place merit and accountability above loyalty and tradition—the values emphasized by the *tanda* system. Chief of Staff Ponce, although aware that disgruntled junior officers are demanding wholesale changes, has been reluctant to defy class unity and purge the *Tandones*. Ponce also has not complied with a request from President Cristiani late last year, [redacted] to remove certain officers.

Ponce, who repeatedly tells US officials he believes reform is desirable, has responded to critics pressing for change by stressing the need to minimize the disruption of the officer corps during the war. [redacted]

[redacted] Ponce wants to avoid the perception of caving in to the Faribundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), which is demanding the dismantling of the *Tandones* as part of any political settlement. [redacted]

[REDACTED] that Ponce believes he can control junior officer discontent. [REDACTED]

Nevertheless, the Chief of Staff has demonstrated his willingness to make some concessions by "exiling" four *Tandona* members to defense attaché positions:

- Col. Natividad Jesus Caceres now serves as the defense attaché in Chile after being removed from his command post last year on charges of corruption, brutality, extortion, and an armed confrontation last year with the US Ambassador.
- Col. Carlos Mauricio Guzman Aguilar was recently reassigned as the defense attaché in Costa Rica after an investigation—ordered last fall by Cristiani—of allegations of incompetence and corruption. He previously headed the National Police and the National Intelligence Directorate.
- Col. Roberto Staben, a military detachment commander, has been appointed attaché in Honduras. Although he is reputed to be an effective commander, he had been exiled to an area of little combat activity because of allegations of a pattern of abuse of authority, human rights violations, and corruption over a long period, including earlier involvement in a kidnapping ring.
- Col. Humberto Villalta, commander of the Navy, has been appointed attaché in Spain. Last fall Cristiani ordered Ponce to investigate Villalta on charges of corruption, specifically of using Navy fuel to power his shrimp boats. [REDACTED]

Other long-demonstrated commanders escaped transfer in the most recent series of changes, but [REDACTED] indicates pressure continues to build for their removal.

- Col. Jose Emilio Chavez Caceres commands the 5th Brigade. He is suspected of involvement in a possible coverup of an investigation after his troops executed 10 peasants suspected of FMLN affiliations last year.

- Col. Hector Heriberto Hernandez was reassigned early this year to command the 6th Brigade, a move that angered critics demanding his placement in a noncommand position. He previously had directed the Treasury Police, where he [REDACTED] was widely disliked because of incompetence and corruption. [REDACTED]

Outlook

Junior officers complained directly to the President last year about the incompetence and corruption of many *Tandona* members, and the failure to make changes faster is likely to encourage more unhappiness in junior officer ranks. These officers, increasingly concerned about their own progress upward, probably will be especially dissatisfied over the repeated delay in promoting Ponce to Minister of Defense—a move that would trigger advancement of lower academy classes. The ouster of senior commanders, in our view, would be an important step toward weakening the *tanda* tradition and paving the way for a system of promotions and assignments based on merit rather than class loyalties. Moreover, we believe such a reform would go a long way toward improving the effectiveness of the military and making it more responsive to civil authority. The precedent also could preempt problems with the next large *tanda*, the class of 1973, whose members were recently promoted to lieutenant colonel. [REDACTED]

El Salvador Chronology

March - April 1990

1 March

Air, naval, and ground forces launch an operation on the southeastern coast to deny logistic resupply to the FMLN before the inauguration of the new government in Managua.

5 March

_____ says the FMLN intends to attack a commercial airliner with surface-to-air missiles.

6 March

Insurgents attack a military helicopter carrying Attorney General Colorado to the exhumation of five civilians killed in a resettlement camp last month. One person is killed, and nine of the 11 on board are wounded.

The office of the Christian Committee for the Displaced reopens three months after closing.

The Armed Forces announce plans for continued nationwide offensive operations to interdict FMLN logistic resupply operations and protect the country's economic infrastructure. (S NP)

7 March

_____ says the rebels will temporarily suspend logistic operations in the regions of _____ Southern Usulután Department, because of the Armed Forces presence in the area.

8 March

A civilian jury convicts 26 civil defense members for the rape and massacre of 23 peasants in 1982.

Rebels bomb several businesses and engage the military in a few small-scale skirmishes around San Salvador.

9 March

Some 150 rebels attack a coffee plant in Usulután Department, killing four soldiers and wounding six.

At least 10 rebels are killed during an 18-hour hour attack against Ciudad Barrios in northern San Miguel. The attack force is estimated at 250 to 300.

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13 March

A group of insurgents barricade roads into [REDACTED] in Usulután Department and hold the town hostage for five hours, leaving when Air Force helicopters fly over the area. [REDACTED]

The FMLN unveils a series of unilateral steps it will initiate on 16 March to seek a peaceful solution to the war, including suspending some sabotage operations and halting assassination attempts against civilian officials. [REDACTED]

14 March

Suspected FMLN members attack and wound an Air Force pilot and his two brothers outside their home in San Salvador. [REDACTED]

15 March

A judge imprisons two Army sergeants accused of murder and rape. [REDACTED]

A group of former Army soldiers asks the Legislative Assembly to approve an amnesty for as many as 200 soldiers implicated in crimes "committed in the line of duty." [REDACTED]

16 March

A Honduran Army patrol surveilling a deserted FMLN base camp discovers a cache of six field-expedition mines, one rifle grenade, wiring material for booby traps, and FMLN propaganda documents. [REDACTED]

The FMLN attacks 2nd Military Detachment soldiers patrolling near a displaced persons camp in Cabañas Department. [REDACTED]

Judge Zamora, the head of the investigation into the Jesuit murders on 16 November 1989, meets for the first time with Colonel Rivas, the director of the Special Investigations Unit. [REDACTED]

18 March

The FMLN destroys electrical posts and burns two buses, violating its suspension of sabotage operations and attacks against civilians. [REDACTED]

19 March

The FMLN conducts three drive-by shootings, one against the Guatemalan Embassy in San Salvador, killing two policemen and wounding two civilians. [REDACTED]

20 March

An FMLN delegation meets with Venezuelan President Pérez and reportedly seeks his assistance in achieving peace in El Salvador. [REDACTED]

The FMLN attacks the Civil Defense post at San Francisco del Monte, Cabañas Department, killing four soldiers, and wounding five. [REDACTED]

21 March

Section Infantry Brigade members engage rebels in the area of Las Vueltas, Chalatenango Department for over 11 hours. Some 12 insurgents are killed, and 13 soldiers are wounded. After the battle, two soldiers are killed and four wounded during an ambush of the land evacuation.

22 March

Press reports indicate El Salvador has unilaterally decided to suspend the transit of Nicaraguan trucks or containers transporting merchandise through Salvadoran territory.

The son-in-law of the Air Force commander, Gen. Rafael Villamariona, is seriously wounded during a kidnap attempt in San Salvador.

24 March

Between 5,000 and 7,000 people, many of them foreigners, attend a march commemorating the 10th anniversary of Archbishop Romero's assassination.

26 March

A member [redacted] says urban commandos are discussing plans to kidnap Americans in San Salvador.

Two 5th Brigade soldiers and a national policeman, all explosives experts, are killed while trying to deactivate a mine.

27 March

The National Union of Salvadoran Workers, the largest Marxist labor umbrella organization, reopens its labor institute, which was closed and occupied by members of the 1st brigade on 17 November 1989.

The government's Human Rights Commission completes a preliminary investigation into the killings of Rfrain and Cristina Cabrera on 10 March by uniformed soldiers, who allegedly also robbed and raped other family members.

28 March

Seven civil defense members are convicted for the murders and robbery of four people in Sonsonate Department in 1984.

A 6th Military Detachment sergeant is convicted of the murders of two Guatemalan businessmen traveling on the Pan-American Highway in 1988.

A Signal Training Center patrol detects a group of insurgents moving toward the Presidential Palace, apparently to launch a harassment attack. The FMLN fires a light antitank weapon in the resulting firefight.

29 March

President Cristiani begins a three-day visit to Venezuela.